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ABSTRACT

The aims of this paper are to: (1) illustrate a practical, collaborative methodology that helps to provide insights into teaching perspectives and practices; (2) provide information about a self-study approach that had the potential to assist educational practitioners in diverse roles and contexts develop understanding about themselves, their professional milieus, and their work; and (3) encourage educational practitioners to engage in dialogic, collegial forms of self-study as a means of reflection and as a way of extending the boundaries of their thinking. Two literacy teacher educators report on writing and sharing teaching cases with each other as practical, collaborative self-inquiry methodology. Their experience in case writing and shared feedback is presented through two examples of teaching cases, with commentaries. The two teachers conclude that authoring and sharing teaching cases has enhanced their understanding of the distinctly unique nature of teachers' decisions and actions, focused attention on how decisions are made, and helped the them recognize the extent to which their decisions impact students and others. Writing about teaching has also challenged them to new modes of thinking about themselves as teacher educators. (Contains 41 references.) (ND)

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ED 409 279

Running Head: Writing and Sharing Teaching Cases

Writing and Sharing Teaching Cases: A Practical Method of Collaborative Self-Study

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Writing and Sharing Teaching Cases: A Practical Method of Collaborative Self-Study

A "difficult aspect of the writing process is putting words on to the page...what becomes more difficult is to find strength enough to hold writing up for a long enough period in order to begin to examine it, interrogate it, unravel it,...understand it" (Rasberry, 1996, p. 4)

"There's no quick way to write a case narrative. Cases do not fall, without effort, from the mind to paper. They must be crafted, like clay is sculpted, until the finished product is as close to perfect as it can be made" (Wasserman, 1994, p. 47)

The Purpose of Sharing Our Work

The purpose of sharing our work with you is to "inform and enhance teacher education and practice" (Cole & Knowles, 1994, p. 32). Our specific objectives are threefold: 1) to illustrate a practical, collaborative methodology that helps to provide insights into our teaching perspectives and practices; 2) to provide information about a self-study approach that has the potential to assist educational practitioners in diverse roles and contexts develop understanding about themselves, their professional milieus, and their work and; 3) to stimulate and encourage educational practitioners to engage in dialogic, collegial forms of self-study as a means of reflection and as a way of extending "the boundaries of their thinking" (Knowles & Cole, 1995, p. 71).

Who We Are

We are two literacy teacher educators who work in very different teaching contexts in Mississippi and Florida. We met five years ago in San Antonio, Texas at the National Reading Conference. We are more diverse than alike in our personality dimensions, talents, and background experiences. Yet, through E-mail correspondence, telephone calls, and planned face-to-face meetings at annual literacy and research conferences, we have developed a close professional and personal relationship. We are honest and open with each other. We share the same philosophical values about the importance and benefits of constructivist teaching. We care deeply about our students and our work -- and we are committed to self-study as a means of scrutinizing and improving our teaching practices. We also believe that self-study involves more than consciously reflecting about one's professional decisions and behavior. Self-study involves displaying one's professional actions and thinking to colleagues for their review, reassurance, questions, critiques, and suggestions (Munby, 1995).

Beliefs as Catalysts

Our beliefs about the practical and practitioner nature of self-study serve as catalysts for our collaborative self-study efforts and are situated in the following definitions: Self-study "is conducted by practitioners to help them understand their contexts, practices, and, in the case of teachers, their students. The outcome of the inquiry may be a change in practice, or it may be an enhanced understanding" (Richardson, 1994, p. 7). Self study is "a deliberate attempt to collect data systematically that can offer insight into professional practice" (Clift, Veale & Holland, 1990, p. 54). Self-study research involves considerably more than sharing aspects of professional practice. It involves displaying and exposing one's practices to colleagues and submitting one's professional actions to the scrutiny of peers" (Munby, 1995). Self-study must demonstrate functional validity; that is, "has it taken the practitioner where he or she wished to go?" (Munby & Russell, 1995, p. 73)

Giving Authority to Our Subjective Voices

Our self-study initiatives are situated in a variety of theoretical perspectives, including symbolic interactionism, sociology, action research, constructivism, and anthropology (Elliott, 1991; Grant & Fine, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nias, 1989; Teitelbaum & Britzman, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978; Watson & Watson-Franke, 1985). Historical antecedents for self-inquiry are found in the writings of philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1894/1977). Noted contemporary feminist pedagogists and others interested in human behavior also emphasize the importance of the subjective (Belenky, Clinchey, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Britzman, 1991; Bruner, 1986; Carter, 1992; Hollingsworth, 1994). In addition, a number of educational researchers (e.g., Bullough, Knowles & Crow, 1991; Kelchtermans & Vandenburgh, 1994; Munby & Russell, 1995), and philosophers (e.g., Hanson, 1986; Noddings, 1984) acknowledge the importance of studying the self, cautioning against detachment, contending that personal growth is only possible in relationship to connectedness with others.

Our theoretical framework stems from Dewey's (1933) thinking concerning the importance of teacher qualities of open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness. We also are influenced by "the power of narrative in human lives...and dialogue in educational practice" (Witherell & Noddings, 1991 pp.1, 5). Sharing personal truths through stories and engaging in intimate conversations about teaching practices has the potential to deepen educators' understandings about their decisions, behavior, and professional knowledge (see Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Further, our ideas are shaped by work on women's identities

and women's ways of knowing (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982) and by writings on moral development (Kohlberg,1981, 1984). Aspects of both perspectives emphasize accepting responsibility for one's decisions and actions. In addition, we draw on Martin Buber's work concerning the importance of relationships (1965) and on ideas from sociolinguistic theory which posit that "understanding is formed within social interactions...in the sharing of meaning between readers and texts and between persons" (Hunsaker & Johnston, 1992, p. 365). Equally important, we acknowledge the power of evocative/alternative genres of writing as potential forums for reflective practice, as a means of researching and coming to know the self, as methods of inquiry, as processes for reliving, recreating, and attempting to understand an educational experience, and as a way to pursue truth (Knowles & Cole, 1995; O'Dea, 1994; Rasberry, 1997; Richardson, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). Finally, we are sensitive to ideas from hermeneutic methodology which consider "the subtle nuance of voice, language, and perspective and...[indicate] that the same text can be read [and interpreted] in a number of different ways" (Tappan & Brown, 1991, p. 186).

Writing and Sharing Teaching Cases: A Natural Sequence of Events

It was a natural sequence of events that inspired us to write and share teaching cases with each other as practical, collaborative self-inquiry methodology. The first event was our participation in informal reflective study group meetings at the National Reading Conference. Initiated in 1992, this group offers a safe, caring place for literacy teacher educators to share and help one another address and reflect upon personal teaching concerns and dilemmas. The second event was Janet's deep involvement with S-STEP (Self-Study of Educational Practices), a special interest group of the American Educational Research Association. Grounded in self-study, S-STEP is devoted to the enhancement of teaching practices "in collaboration within a community" (Whitehead, 1995, p. 115). The third event/phenomenon was our growing interest in case writing as an effective method for fostering educational practitioners' habits of reflection on practice (see Colbert, Trimble & Desberg, 1996; L. Shulman, 1992).

Authoring Cases

We have been authoring teaching cases for about a year. Typically, cases in teacher education are focused engaging narratives, contextualized in time and place, and varying in length from one to 30 pages. Cases describe an educational problem or a series of related problems. However, "embedded within...[the narrative] are other problems that can be discussed" (J. Shulman, 1993, p. 2). It is important to note that cases are not just appealing, interesting stories about

teaching. Case narratives "are drawn around problems that warrant serious, in-depth examination" (Wassermann, 1994, p. 3). In addition, teaching cases usually are centered around issues that exemplify instances of larger categories of knowledge, such as moral, political, and ethical dilemmas associated with teaching, biases about students, multicultural issues, or communication or relational problems among school participants (see L. Shulman, 1992).

As Wasserman (1994) notes, writing case narratives takes considerable time and effort. Our first step is to identify and consciously reflect about a worrisome classroom problem or a series of related problems requiring our attention. Next, we write about our teaching concerns and perplexities, using writing "as a way of knowing...[and as] a method of inquiry" (Richardson, 1994, p. 516). Writing encourages us "to reflect deeply and discerningly on...[our practices and reveals our] interpretations of particular situations" (O'Dea, 1994, p. 167). Writing illuminates our subconsciously-held professional beliefs and uncovers the ways we make decisions about our work. Writing also reveals our self-doubts, apprehensions, and insecurities. Through writing we move from a private to a public place and discover new facets of ourselves as teacher educators.

Authoring teaching narratives requires us to write in a nonacademic, informal style. We have to remember to exclude extraneous details, write in the first person, include authentic dialogue and rich detail, examine the many sides of our problem, and portray real characters. Finally, we have to brainstorm and attempt to come up with possible solutions to our teaching dilemmas.

Following Wassermann's (1994) advice, we write many drafts of a case until we are satisfied with the finished product. Then, demanding work lies ahead. We turn our cases over to each other for collegial review, scrutiny, and affirmation. We provide commentaries, critiquing each others' professional decisions and behavior and offering thoughtful and hopefully honest and useful feedback.

Two Examples of Our Teaching Cases with Commentaries

May 10, 1996

Dear Janet,

I've just finished another teaching case and would like your comments and ideas about my grading policy. After reading the case over and over, I've decided that maybe I'm confused. We've talked about our strong beliefs about constructivist practices -- and yet, in this case I wrote, "If they do the work, they would learn everything I wanted them to learn in the process." Where did that "I" statement come from? Let me know what you think. Peace!! Mary Alice

The Criers Versus "Late with No Penalty"

Two of my students cried on Wednesday and three cried on Thursday. They'd showed up in my office begging to turn in their end-of-semester portfolios late, with no penalty. Some seemed to have good excuses, so I allowed a "late with no penalty." If a student had a really good excuse, it seemed cruel to penalize lateness. For example, one student's daughter had a strep throat and was running such a high fever that she was hospitalized. She showed me her daughter's hospital records and said, "I've spent the past three nights awake at the hospital." It was obvious just from looking at her that she hadn't slept for quite awhile. I thought that was a good excuse for "late with no penalty."

I have to tell you that in my syllabus there is a strong statement for people who have no excuses -- who procrastinate until they don't get their portfolio in on the due date. If portfolios are turned in late it puts me behind in having individual meetings with students and it slows down my end-of semester grading. Besides, procrastination is irresponsible. My students are preparing to become teachers and they are going to have to accept high levels of responsibility very soon. So, students lose one point from their final grade for every day their portfolio is late -- including weekends -- because they can drop off their portfolios at my house on weekends, if necessary. These "No excuse, accept the penalty" students were the ones who were crying.

Later that day, after all of the "late portfolio," crying students had left, I started to have some doubts about my portfolio grading policy. On the one hand, my goal was for students to do the work. If they did the work, they would learn everything I wanted them to learn in the process. So, what difference would it make if a few students turned in their portfolios a few days late? It might upset my schedule slightly. But, nothing is more important than having my students learn what I expect them to learn. On the other hand, if I allow some students to turn in their portfolios late, with no penalty, wasn't that unfair to the students

who turned theirs in on time? What about the ones who turned it in on time but, the work was incomplete? Was it fair for someone who turned in a perfect portfolio late to get a higher grade than someone who turned in a less than perfect portfolio on time? Shouldn't there be some reward for getting everything in on time?

After dealing with the criers, I went to class to collect the rest of the portfolios. I felt frenzied with all that I had to do and all of this emotional stuff going on. As soon as I walked in, students started to bombard me with questions and comments. One said, "I haven't finished my portfolio and I don't want to turn it in. I'd rather turn it in later when it's finished, even if I do get a lower grade."

Another student showed a signed doctor's excuse so I allowed another "late with no penalty." A third student said, "I have no excuse but I'm not ready to turn in my portfolio."

When I told her that I'd take off a point for each day it was late she responded angrily, "What do you want me to do??? Make up an excuse or get a doctor friend to write one for me?"

"No," I answered slowly. "If you don't have the work done and you have no excuse, you have to accept the consequences."

"Do you **really** think that all of these people who didn't finish their portfolios have legitimate excuses?" she demanded.

"Not all of the students have legitimate excuses and they are going to lose points," I said. I knew that I was beginning to sound defensive. I also recognized that I was arguing with a student.

"Some of these people are lying to you. I could have done that too, but I didn't. I decided to tell you the truth because I thought you would appreciate that!!" she replied.

I mentally reviewed a list of all of the students who had just received a "late with no penalty' from me. Were some of them lying? Which ones? I felt that I had to stand my ground -- no excuse -- accept the penalty. Now the girl's eyes were beginning to fill with tears.

"I'm sorry," I said. "If you have no excuse you will lose points."

"But, I'm already down to a 91," she stated angrily. "If I lose one more point I'll get a B."

"Then you'll have to get a B," I replied.

"Even if I turn in an A portfolio?" she demanded

"Yes, even if you turn in an A portfolio," I answered.

The girl returned to her seat and another student approached me. But, my attention was still drawn to the angry girl. Her movements were jerky, showing her anger and her face was getting redder and redder. Then she put her head down on her desk. Moments passed and then she suddenly rose from her seat,

grabbed her book bag and purse, and rushed out of the room. Another student followed, anxious to see if she was okay. I felt like a heel, but was irritated with myself for feeling that way. I had been as fair as I knew how to be, right?

Soon class was over and the rest of the students followed me to my car to put their portfolios in my trunk. These students seemed jovial -- they were happy to be finished with the course and with their portfolios. They even joked with me. But, I felt sullen. I didn't want to be the kind of professor who had students crying in her class and students storming out of the room.

Since then I've been pondering about my grading policy. Is my system of "late with no penalty" really fair? Had some students really lied to me about their excuses for not turning in their portfolios? Do I need to change the rules? If I do need to change the rules, what changes should I make?

Commentary on The Criers Versus "Late with No Penalty"

June 1, 1996

Dear Mary Alice,

I've read and reread your case and I can feel your hurt and confusion. You care for your students deeply. You also care deeply for your work and for the teaching profession. I've jotted down some questions and notes --- here they are.

1) Let's be honest. I'd be worried about my evaluations from the students in this class. Are you concerned?

2) Do your colleagues also have rules for turning in assignments on time? If so, do they follow those rules? Would it be possible to devise department regulations about turning in assignments on time?

3) It seems to me that your students didn't really expect you to enforce your rules about "late with a penalty." Why is that?

4) Why do students cry? How do we know their crying is legitimate? When you know their crying is a manifestation of legitimate feelings, what do you do? I've had students cry in my office too. First I get annoyed and then I feel badly so I fuss over them -- give them a tissue -- pat their shoulder -- give then a hug. I'm just as confused about crying students as you are. Let's talk more about this one, including our reactions to crying students.

5) I certainly agree with the part in your case where you say, "It was time to get responsible, wasn't it?" Why do students give excuses like, "I'm working 40 hours a week," or "I'm taking 21 hours this semester," ? On the other hand, I have to tell you that when students give excuses, I usually let them slide. I let them slide because I want them to like me -- I know -- I know -- that shouldn't be an issue -- but it is. I need to work on this one.

6) I guess you know that you were acting defensively with your students and that you also were arguing with them. I have a thing that I do with argumentative students that usually works for me and I hope works for them. I tell them, "I don't argue with students. Please write a letter to me and put it in my mail box, or E-mail me. Then, I'll write back to you. After that, let's have a face-to-face meeting." This strategy seems to work because students have time to gain some emotional control. Also -- as you know, when you write something, it forces you to put down the truth, as you see it. This acts as a defuser, too. I must tell you though, that last week some students confronted me at the beginning of class and I forgot my own advice. I stood there and listened to them, wasting valuable class time instead of asking them to write their complaints.

7) Your note to me about constructivist teaching is very revealing. Do we always practice what we preach? Of course not!! But, we should!! Not only that -- we shouldn't preach, should we? This is another great topic for our discussions.

8) Does your policy about "late with a penalty" need to be more explicitly stated on your syllabus? Do you discuss this policy in class? Does the term "extenuating circumstances" need to be spelled out?

9) You might try giving your students a "window of time" to turn in their portfolios. In other words, the portfolios could be turned in three weeks before the end of the semester. Students should strive for an early turn-in. However, students who experience difficulties could have the option of turning in their portfolios by the last day of finals.

10) I hope this has been some help to you and that I haven't been preachy and a "know-it-all." I don't have all of the answers and many times I am really confused about a decision I've made in class so I know how you feel.

Let me know what you are thinking. Janet

September 14, 1996

Hi Mary Alice

Well, here it is -- a case about how I tried to handle a touchy situation with two students. I think that in some portions of the case I sound flip and I don't like that. Don't spare my feelings. Give me your honest opinions. Janet

What To Do About Vivien and Suzie?

As I walked out of Diamond Elementary School after class a soft voice called to me. "Dr. Richards, could I speak to you for a minute?"

The look on Vivien's face served as a warning that she was going to tell me about another problem. It was early in the semester and some of my new preservice teachers in the reading and language arts methods block were still anxious, confused, and uptight. Working out in "the real world" of an elementary school in a university early field placement isn't easy when all of a sudden you have responsibilities for devising and presenting twice weekly literacy lessons for six to ten children based upon their needs, interests and current research suggestions.

"Perhaps she wants me to talk about how to make those Reading Logs," I thought. I could tell by the frown on her face during my lecture today that she was confused about Reading Logs." The truth is that Vivien was one of those students who was confused about everything -- at least that's what she kept telling me. She didn't understand about Personal Dictionaries. She had trouble helping her first grade students decide upon a broadly-based theme to help structure and integrate their semester's work. She didn't know how to help students use their Prediction Logs. Worse (in my opinion), was that Vivien never smiled when she was with her group of students. In fact Vivien never looked happy, including when she was in class or when she visited me in my office. I've had a few other preservice teachers like that. Usually their anxieties keep them from doing their best work. They "visit" me, e-mail me, and call me on the phone, often. They complain about their students' behavior. They blame their students when lessons don't go as planned. They tend to blame me for their confusions. Just like some of my former elementary students, some of my preservice teachers are sometimes not very lovable -- or even likable. But I really do work at it -- I try to nurture these students -- I help them every step of the way. That's what I was trying to do with Vivien -- even though some days it was a little hard to keep on smiling, listening, explaining, nurturing, supporting, and encouraging.

"Dr. Richards," Vivien continued, "I'm having a problem with Suzie."

"Suzie?" I wondered to myself. "Oh yes." Now I remembered. "Suzie that tall, smiley, outgoing preservice teacher -- the one who's a take charge person -- the one with all those clever, creative ideas." I might as well be truthful here. Suzie was a lot like me -- an extrovert -- and if Suzie didn't know everything she was supposed to be doing, well -- that didn't bother her. Suzie knew she could make everything turn out okay. I've had preservice teachers like Suzie too. It's easy to work with students like Suzie. "Careful here," I warned myself. "Listen carefully -- be objective -- be professional."

Vivien continued, "Suzie is causing me to lose control of my group. She talks too loudly and my kids keep on looking over at her. She paints with the kids and then my group wants to do that. She even brings them things like little erasers and they all wore pirate hats today when they read a story about buried treasure."

"Keep an open mind," I told myself. "Try to be objective. Maybe Suzie really is too loud."

"Let me check up on that Vivien," I said, stalling for time. The next day I was in my office, reading and responding to my preservice teachers' dialogue journal entries. In anticipation I picked up Suzie's journal (she always wrote interesting, clever stuff), and began to read. There it was -- a continuation of the "Vivien/Suzie" problem.

Dear Dr. Richards,

You've got to do something about Vivien. She yelled at me after class and told me not to teach next to her because I disturbed her group. She even told me that I couldn't bring special things to share with my kids. What should I do?

Love, Suzie

Before I could even begin to think of what to write back to Susie, there she stood at my office door. "Have you read my journal yet?" Suzie asked.

"Yes," I admitted with a sigh. "Come on in and sit down. Shut the door." For the next 15 minutes Suzie and I tried to get to the bottom of this Vivien/Suzie problem. As we spoke I was very aware of the ethical dimensions of this situation. I had not yet spoken in private to Vivien. I had not observed the teaching situation first hand because my preservice teachers didn't teach again until the following Wednesday. "Was Vivien right? Was Suzie right? Should I even be talking to Suzie before I had observed their teaching context and their instructional behavior? Should I just tell Suzie to teach out in the hallway even though the principal hates preservice teachers and their students working in the halls? Should I speak to the classroom teacher?"

I had to make some sort of decision. "I'll tell you what I'll do Suzie," I said. "I'll come see the two of you first thing Wednesday morning."

When I observed Vivien and Suzie on Wednesday, it was clear that Suzie was doing all the right things. She's a natural-born teacher. Her group of students was completely involved in the lesson. Mysterious music was playing softly on Suzie's tape recorder and everyone, including Suzie, was wearing Halloween costumes which Suzie had made to accompany her reading of a story about a good witch and her mean sisters. Dressed like the good witch, Suzie occasionally waved a scraggly broom above her head and laughed just like good witches do -- "Heh, heh, heh."

In contrast, Vivien and her group of students were not doing much of anything except looking over at Susie and her students. This dilemma was escalating. "What now?" I thought. "I could talk with Vivien and help her come to some understanding about how to prepare and offer good lessons. I could ask Suzie to 'Tone it down.' This might solve the immediate problem but would it help Vivien learn to take responsibilities for her teaching for the rest of her professional life? That's it!!" I suddenly realized. "Vivien isn't taking responsibilities for her lessons. She isn't taking any responsibilities for her own or her students' successes."

As if to verify my conclusion, Vivien turned and whispered to me, "See Dr. Richards, she's bothering my group and these kids are hard enough to handle. They just won't listen. These kids are tough."

I whispered back to Vivien, "Come and see me today or tomorrow so that we can talk about this." But, by the end of the week Vivien hadn't showed up

Two days later I was sitting in my office reading my preservice teachers' first case writing assignments. Their task was to write at least a three page case describing a teaching concern, problem, or worry. You probably have already guessed the topics of Vivien's and Suzie's cases. "WHAT TO DO ABOUT VIVIEN?", written by Suzie is a classic piece. Vivien's case isn't written in Suzie's dramatic style, but she explains her point of view in an honest, forthright manner. Suzie came to see me again the next day. "I'm tearing my hair out Dr. Richards!!," she said. "Vivien hates me!!"

Once more I told Suzie to sit down and close my office door."Before you panic, let me share my plan," I replied. For the the next half hour we discussed how we could help Vivien. I explained to Suzie how good teachers share their ideas with colleagues. We spoke about being kind and gracious to others and how when you share teaching ideas it makes room for new ideas to pop into your head. We spoke about what it means to be a professional and how helping our colleagues really enhances our profession. We thought of a great idea. Suzie is going to ask Vivien to help her plan a Scavenger Hunt for their combined groups.

She's going to model her thinking and instructional planning for Vivien and she and Vivien are going to brainstorm together in order to come up with some good Scavenger Hunt clues and some good places to hide those clues. Suzie doesn't know this, but I'm going to do some things too. Vivien needs to experience success. She needs to feel good about herself as a person and as a teacher. She needs to learn to accept responsibility for herself and her students It's my job to help her. Fortunately the semester is only half over so I have some time to nurture and support Vivien.

I still have many questions about how I handled this situation so far. Do I identify too much with Susie? I think so. Have I really handled this dilemma in an ethical way? Have I brushed off Vivien, thinking that she is preservice teacher who will never be an outstanding educator? For some reason (or many), I feel vaguely apprehensive about my actions. What do you think?

Commentary on What To Do about Vivien and Suzie?

November 4, 1996

Dear Janet,

Here are my opinions/suggestions about Vivien and Suzie:

1) Placing more than one preservice teacher in a classroom doesn't work for me. When I have placed a group of preservice teachers together, one preservice teacher always is more professionally advanced than the others. As a result, the advanced preservice teacher rises to the top and the others fall to the bottom. I have tried to get my preservice teachers to collaborate and help one another. But the less advanced preservice teachers seem to resent help being offered. Therefore, they develop terrible attitudes. Could you try placing one preservice teacher in a classroom?

2) I would have pulled Vivien out of her teaching situation and given her a fresh start. I would have tried to find a mentoring classroom teacher who could pull Vivien out of her doldrums.

3) Do you think that you placed Suzie in a difficult position? If things didn't work out, would Suzie have to step in time after time and solve Vivien's problems? I don't think that Suzie's job as a preservice teacher was to help Vivien, along with all of her other teaching responsibilities.

4) Do you think that you were shirking your own responsibilities by asking Suzie to step in and model for Vivien? Were you avoiding the trauma of finding a new placement for Vivien? Were you avoiding talking to Vivien about her difficulties?

5) I feel sorry for Vivien. But, I too have worked with preservice teachers who have taken hours, weeks, and yes, months of my time. After two semesters of enormous cognitive and emotional energy on my part, they still exhibited few teaching skills. I admit that I don't know what to do about these types of students. Perhaps I'll write my next teaching case about my dilemmas with those few preservice teachers who are, and who remain, professionally inept. What do we do about them? Pass them on until they graduate? What do other teacher education programs do about this? Is this an unspoken, secret, teacher education problem ?

6) You asked me what I thought of your solution to the Vivien/Suzie dilemma I certainly like the part in your case where you accept responsibility for nurturing and supporting Vivien. But, I'm wondering how this situation turned out? Did these two preservice teachers develop a collegial relationship? How is Vivien doing?

7) I hope that I haven't been too harsh. We'll talk more. Peace, Mary Alice

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Reflections

Writing and exchanging teaching cases with each other are acts of collegial trust. Sometimes, we unmask parts of ourselves that we prefer would remain hidden. Often, we show our confusions, apprehensions, frustrations, and anxieties. Occasionally, we disclose information that highlights our deficiencies. Always, we increase our vulnerability by providing details about our professional life that invite potential criticisms and critiques.

Our collegial self-study affiliation works because we trust each other and we have moved into the boundaries of close friendship. At the same time, we are careful to balance our inclinations to be candid and honest with each other. We recognize that we are under strong obligations to protect each other's feelings and to affirm each other's strong points (see Brothers, 1997).

There is no doubt that authoring and sharing teaching cases has enhanced our understanding of the distinctly unique nature of teachers' decisions and actions.

Case writing focuses our attention on how we make decisions and helps us recognize to what extent our decisions impact our students and others with whom we work. In addition, we have discovered that more often than not, there is no single or perfect decision or solution to a teaching dilemma. Because of idiosyncrasies in our teaching styles, variations in our work contexts, and differences in our perceptions, interpretations, and realities of events, what may be appropriate actions to teaching concerns for one of us may not work at all for the other. Rather, good teachers make informed decisions and take thoughtful actions based upon their instructional milieus, their professional knowledge and experiences, and how seriously they define themselves as problem solvers who are responsible for their own actions (Merseth, 1991).

Writing about teaching also has challenged us to new modes of thinking about ourselves as teacher educators. Completing a case narrative to the best of our abilities is satisfying and informative. However, as final products, our cases play supportive/secondary roles to the process of writing as discovery. It is the process of writing that stimulates our conscious awareness, forcing us to own up to our actions and reactions to difficult teaching situations. It is the process of writing that demystifies our intentions, helping us explore and analyze newly discovered facets of our professional selves. It is the process of writing that provides unexpected insights into our motivations, enabling us to discover what might otherwise remain elusive (Van Manen, 1977). Ultimately, the process of writing validates us as active agents in our own understanding (Colbert, Trimble & Desberg, 1996).

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